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Creating Sustainable Communities – a means to enhance social mobility?

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to describe the origins, composition and outputs of the development in the UK of a generic course: Creating Sustainable Communities (CSC). The paper describes the origins and inception of CSC in work undertaken within coastal communities in the Mediterranean. Developed in order to encourage participation in self-review of sustainability for diverse social groupings in Coastal Area Management Programmes in Cyprus, Malta, Algeria, Slovenia and Lebanon (2000 – 2006), CSC was subsequently developed in collaboration between Dr. Simon Bell and the UK Homes and Communities Academy (HCA – formerly the Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC)) and linked to the HCA Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities. By 2007 the course had been refined as a generic module for application in a number of presentational forms: within Higher Education, Continuing Professional Development and community development.

CSC provides a powerful means for communities of all kinds to assess their current situation, reflect on how sustainability can be projected onto this reality, measure how sustainable the community is, has been and can be in its own terms and, finally, develop meaningful action plans for agreed change agendas. Such agendas are intended to lead to the enhancement of all aspects of the community and, we argue, can improve the social mobility of all members of the collective.

Key words: Sustainable Community, Participation, sustainability indicators

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1. Background to the course: the development of the 'Imagine' methodology.

The Creating Sustainable Communities (CSC) course, at present being adopted and applied within Higher Education in the UK constitutes a response to the current emerging identification that community sustainability is central to the sustainability of society itself and the capacity of groups within locations or in communities of practice to improve their common livelihoods and their social mobility. This response is also related to what Archer (Archer 2007) has called the 'internal conversation' which guide the patterns of social mobility in contemporary society. The CSC course is intended to develop the internal external conversation – aiding concepts of mobility and linking to more general issues of equality, democracy, development and equity (for a more detailed review of this see: Wilkinson and Pickett 2009)

Although more far ranging, the idea of sustainable community finds its key target in the increasingly urban nature of much human society. Hamilton, argued that urban sustainability is:



“the process of developing a built environment that meets people’s needs whilst avoiding unacceptable social or environmental impacts”. (Hamilton, Mitchell et al. 2002)

Sustainable Communities is a relatively new concept and has developed over the last ten years emerging as a key policy influencer for the UK Government. In line with the appearance of sustainable communities as a key driver of the economic, social and environmental prosperity of the UK, thinking on sustainable communities has grown quite rapidly. This rapid growth started back in 1998 and was fuelled by a report titled 'Towards an Urban Renaissance', which was commissioned by the Government when it invited Lord Rogers, to chair an Urban Task Force to review problems faced by Britain’s towns and cities. The report made a number of recommendations, including the need to promote inter-disciplinary working. Rogers asserted:

“the teaching in professional skills is excellent. The main problem is a lack of inter-disciplinary learning with a strong vocational element. The evidence is that it is generic rather than technical skills that are in short supply” (Rogers 1998 page 161).

This paper explores the way in which the CSC helps people to understand their community environment more fully and engage as a community more fluently and therefore improve the viability of and future mobility for the members of that community.

The CSC module is based on a number of assumptions, tested in the course development and presentation processes:

-  Communities of all kinds are willing and able to engage in sustainability self-review
-  Sustainability is an issue which is relevant to communities of all kinds

- ✚ If the vehicle is seen as being benign, people will be enthusiastic to engage with the sustainability agenda
- ✚ Unless sustainability is relevant to the individual and the community, at a very personal level, it will have little or no chance of engaging the community in dialogue.

This paper explores these assumptions and provides some generic lessons learned.

1.1 Why Sustainable Community?

The notion of human beings living in community but not compromising social or environmental limitations is a key element to the notion sustainable community. Building on this, in 1998 Camagni, argued that:

“Sustainable urban development may be defined as a process of synergetic integration and co-evolution among the great subsystems making up a city (economic, social, physical and environmental), which guarantees the local population a non-decreasing level of well-being in the long term, without compromising the possibilities of development of surrounding areas and contributing by this towards reducing the harmful effects of development on the biosphere.” (Camagni 1998)

In this argument the balance between factors is more clear and the tightrope which community treads more obviously stated. At a more pragmatic level and more recently, in the UK the Homes and Communities Academy argued:

“Most people want to live in a place where they know their neighbours and feel safe. A place with good homes, local shops, lots of jobs and opportunities for young people to get a good education”. (ASC, 2007).

Dominski, et al; has gone further, developing the Academy’s view and linking it to the earlier notions of a more rounded community/ social/ economic and environmental balance:

“Sustainability may be defined as a dynamic balance among three mutually interdependent elements:

- 1 protection and enhancement of natural ecosystems and resources;
- 2 economic productivity; and
- 3 provision of social infrastructure such as jobs, housing, education, medical care and cultural opportunities” (Dominski, Clark et al. 1992)

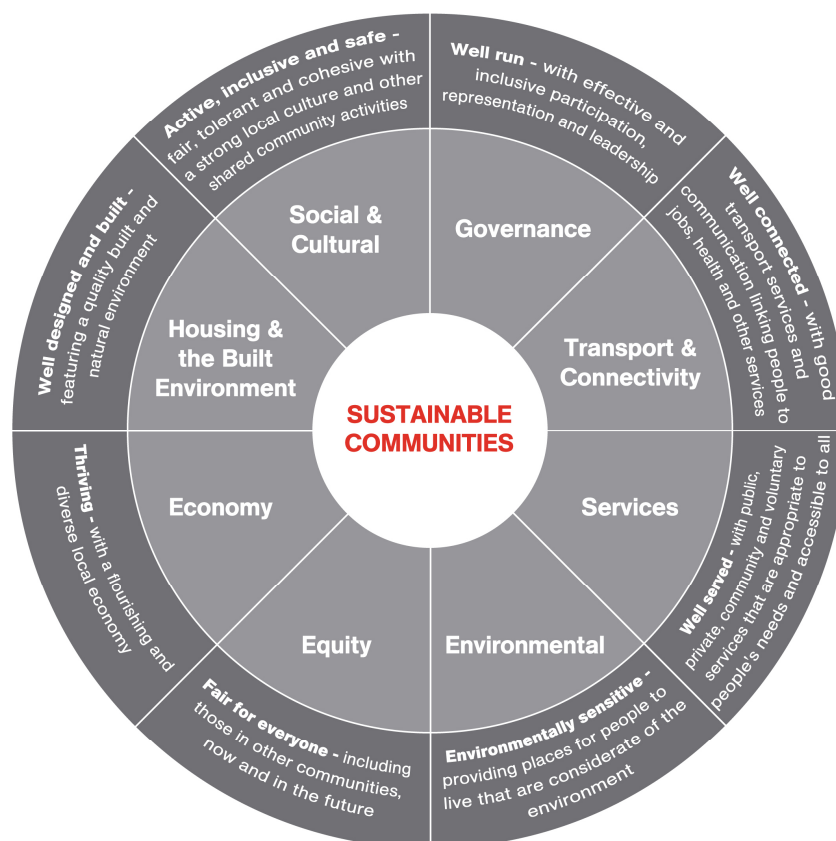
In the UK, the community has been argued to be the pivotal point, relating other concepts concerning sustainability of locale.

In 2000 the UK Government suggested, through ‘Our Towns and Cities: The Future - Delivering an Urban Renaissance’ that a more holistic and inclusive approach should be taken to regeneration, and proposed that Regional Development Agencies should

drive the urban renaissance and sustainable communities agendas forward. This was followed in 2003 by 'Sustainable Communities: building for the future' which signalled the intention of the Government, over the next 10-15 years, to tackle some of the most deep-seated problems facing our communities. It was not until 2004 that the Government asked Sir John Egan to carry out a review to establish whether England had the skills needed to deliver the sustainable communities agenda. 'The Egan Review (Egan 2004) concurred with the Urban Task Force, and suggested that, in addition to their technical competencies, professionals and practitioners dealing with the development of sustainable communities would benefit from a number of 'generic skills' and inter-disciplinary learning.

This pivotal nature is neatly captured in the 'Egan wheel' (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Egan Wheel



The notion of the wheel arose from the work of a task force established in 2004 by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and headed by Sir John Egan (Egan 2004).

At the same time, issues of social justice and mobility were being flagged. Mathew Taylor (Taylor 2005), in describing the findings of a study commissioned by the Sutton Trust reported:

“The report focused on how education affected the life chances of British children compared with those in other countries. It put the UK and the US at the bottom of a social mobility league table of eight European and North American countries, with Norway at the top followed by Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany and Canada.”.

Adding to the political necessity to improve mobility, Roberts (Roberts 2005) argued that there was an imperative for the Labour Government to engage with a range of potentially difficult issues in order to improve social mobility.

In 2006 the Academy was seeking a means to make the principles of the Egan Wheel realisable as both a learning experience (in Higher Education) and as a means to encourage communities of all kinds to assess their own sustainability and, we argue, therefore improve internal mobility by encouraging (among other things) communities and community professionals to engage in Arhcer’s ‘internal conversation’. The Academy decided to adopt the Imagine methodology.

1.2 The development of Imagine

The Imagine Approach arose from gradual research undertaken in the Mediterranean and the UK and recorded in various texts (Bell and Coudert 2000; Bell and Morse 2001; Bell and Morse 2002; Bell and Morse 2003; Bell and Morse 2003; Bell and Morse 2004; Bell and Morse 2005; Bell and Morse 2005; Bell and Morse 2007).

In an earlier book, Bell and Morse described Systemic Sustainability Analysis (SSA) as the “participatory deconstruction and negotiation of what sustainability means to a group of people along with the identification and method of assessment of indicators to assess that vision of sustainability”. They went on to identify the features of SSA, these are summarised below. (for more on this see <http://www.planbleu.org>)




Features of SSA
• sustainability is a subjective feature of any system.
• all members of community have a right to be heard in any analysis.
• sustainability can be negotiated amongst any group of stakeholders
• set of sustainability indicators (SIs) can be identified with which to assess that agreed vision
• SIs may be assessed either quantitatively or qualitatively in order to chart progress (or not) towards the goal
• values’ of SIs can be identified by the group which equate to what is desirable for their own needs.
• care needs to be taken in the presentation of SIs rather than just assume that a tabulation is all that needs to be done
• SIs have no value in themselves unless they are used

These features form the basis of the Imagine Methodology which was developed in collaboration between Bell and the French Environment and development agency – Plan Bleu (see <http://www.planbleu.org>).

1.3 Imagine: oeuvre and elements.

The Imagine Approach requires a learning loop of potentially indefinite duration (capturing the essence of sustainability). It allows communities to understand their context, express their own view of what sustainability means and extend this into a modelling exercise for possible future action planning. Both make use of diagramming and team working skills in order to self-evaluate community sustainability.

The Imagine Approach was adopted by the Academy to form the basis of the new Creating Sustainability course because it offered the potential for:

-  Acknowledged flexibility with robustness
-  A proven track record of development and evolution
-  A possible means for a community to engage with all elements of the Egan Wheel.

This Approach was adapted to the HCA requirements and described below.

2. Sustainable Community in the UK: the work of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)

The delivery of sustainable communities can only be achieved if professionals and practitioners develop new ways of thinking and acting. A number of actions were proposed in the Egan Review which included upgrading generic skills (the skills that are needed if people are going to work effectively together in a variety of collaborative situations to deliver sustainable communities) and promoting a cross-sectoral approach, through improved inter-occupational understanding and sharing of best practice. It recommended the establishment of an Academy, charged with seeking out best practice, exchanging information and ideas, and acting to enhance the skills and know-how of all those involved in sustainable communities. Recognising that knowledge transfer through inter-disciplinary learning plays an important role in skills development.






The Homes and Communities Academy is now an integral part of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), the national housing and regeneration delivery agency for England. It aims to build the skills, knowledge and capacity of HCA's delivery partners to execute successful housing and regeneration programmes; this includes the provision or support of foundation degrees, degree, post-graduate, continuing professional development and research programmes. The Academy is the only learning organisation that spans the entire homes and communities sector; this allows it to create and inspire better ways of working across organisations and

institutions. It is responsible for developing the skills and knowledge of people who create and maintain communities. And strengthens the HCA's role to create affordable, carbon-efficient, well-connected and socially cohesive sustainable places.






3. Elements of the Creating Sustainable Communities (CSC) course

The CSC, built directly off the Imagine Approach can be seen as a sequence of interconnected processes, tools and techniques.

In overview the CSC course takes the student through a five stage process:

-  Understand the context
-  Agree Sustainability Indicators and bands of equilibrium
-  Develop the AMOEBA and scenario making – most specifically making use of the purpose built 'YourScope' sustainability modelling software ¹
-  Review and Meta-scenario making
-  Publicity, publicizing and marketing the message

If the process of the course is fivefold, the main tools and techniques are also fivefold. These comprise:

-  Rich Pictures of original context and of future scenarios
-  Hierarchically graded Tasks and Issues
-  Establishing bands of sustainability
-  YourScope Amoeba diagrams of current, past and future realities
-  Action planning

The CSC encourages a process of reflection (the 'internal conversation'?) to facilitate participants co-understanding of the issues in the community in question. The basis for this understanding is captured by the participants in a rich picture, see example in Figure 2.

¹ 'YourScope' is discussed later in this paper but is essentially a means for a diverse group to model its sense of past and present sustainability and to 'vision' how the sustainability (or unsustainability) trend looks in the future.

Figure 2. A rich picture drawn by a community in Milton Keynes



The picture captures the group's assessment of their current situation vis-a-vie sustainability and provides a means to progress. The participants draw out tasks and issues concerning them and for each or for some in cluster establish indicators by which to assess the health of their community. Gaining insight into locally defined concerns helps to understand the context of the community. Following this participants begin to agree a set of sustainability indicators and to establish common sustainable values to them. Building on these achievements, a diagrammatic representation of the sustainability indicators is developed in the form of an amoeba diagram, see example in in Figure 3.

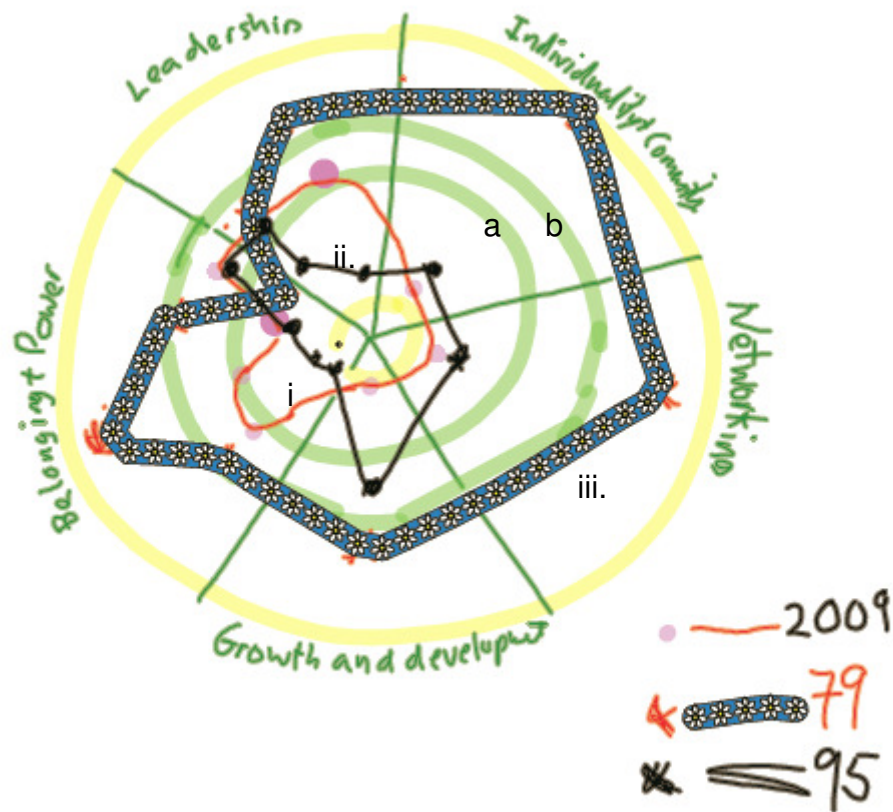
In Figure 5 the community have selected five sectors: Belonging and Power, Leadership, Individuality and community, Networking and Growth and Development, and for each have selected indicators assessing the sustainability of each. Amoeba-like diagrams are shown representing the communities views about these factors for 1979 (in red – marked i), 1995 (in black – marked ii) and 2009 (flowered line – marked iii).

Sustainability would be indicated if the amoeba points fell within the red circle lines marked a b. In this case, all three amoeba do have elements which fall within the sustainable band but whereas the amoeba for 1979 and 1995 are generally within the band .. and therefore un-sustainable by deficit, the amoeba for 2009 is largely outside the band and therefore the community sees itself as largely unsustainable by excess.

The diagrammatic representation of the sustainability indicators leads to scenario making for reflection on the communities' future evolutions. The scenarios are used

to develop action plans to consider what needs to be done next, who should be influenced and what needs to change. Once the action plans are established, these can be used to develop publicity and marketing media of the insights obtained throughout the course.

Figure 3. Amoeba diagram of the Milton Keynes context.



4. Review of the usage and outcomes of the CSC to-date

A large number of Higher Education Institutions have been contacted concerning adoption of the CSC. Table 1 provides an overview of progress made to date.

Table 1. Progress in CSC Adoption

Number	Institution	Early interest	Signs of progress	Some adoption
1	Anglia Ruskin	Yes	Yes	Not yet
2	Belfast Queens	Yes	Yes	Yes at PG
3	Birmingham City	Yes	Yes	Not yet
4	De Montfort	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Exeter	Yes	Yes	Not yet
6	Kingston	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Leeds Met	Yes	Yes	Some partial use
8	London Met	Yes	Yes	Not yet
9	London South Bank	Yes	Yes	Some partial use
10	Loughborough	Yes	No	No
11	Northumbria	Yes	Yes	Some early signs
12	Nottingham	Yes	No	No
13	Open University	Yes	Yes	Yes, pilot VLE
14	Salford	Yes	Yes	Yes as CPD
15	Sheffield Hallam	Yes	Yes	Not yet
16	Southampton	Yes	No	No
17	Stafford	Yes	No	No
18	University Centre Milton Keynes	Yes	Yes	As Master class
19	University of West England	Yes	No	No
20	Westminster	Yes	No	No
Total affirmative in each category	20	20	14	9

In all, twenty universities have shown interest in the adoption of the CSC. At the present time 7 have made progress in either taking up some aspect of the course (e.g. as a framework, as a software package, as a Master class, a Continuing Professional Development course, as introductory lecture material for undergraduates, as Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or as a full postgraduate course).

At a number of locations: Salford, University Centre Milton Keynes, De Montfort and Kingston the CSC is or shortly will be adopted as either CPD or Master class formats. These two forms of presentation are similar in that they tend to be applied with professional groupings rather than for undergraduate or postgraduate students.




The CPD version of CSC has been used most specifically by Salford University. Working with Arms Length Management Organisations involved with housing in the North West of England the course has been applied as a means to assist these organisations to review their working processes, establish sustainability goals for themselves and self-review their progress.

The Master Class version of CSC has been applied in the UK and also in Europe, for regional groups (e.g. East Midlands), for mixtures of academic and social activist groups (e.g. Milton Keynes) and for senior management teams interested in understanding their organisations changing role and long-term strategy (e.g. London).

5. Generic lessons and implications for social mobility

Community sustainability and widening the participation in the 'Single Conversation'² about sustainability is a global issue – and this is an issue integrally related to issues of social justice, inclusion, mobility and poverty (Ivory 2008). The CSC course is one contribution, in a sense it attempts to allow communities to write the grammar of the single conversation from the inside out and to find the trajectory to their own social mobility (absolute or relative) by working with community professionals and community members more directly. Rather than sustainability being an imposed value system, derived from experts and put upon citizens, the emphasis of the course is to develop a translated version of the sustainability agenda and to encourage communities to develop their own narrative, to write their own sustainability 'story'; past to present and, inter-generationally, present to future.

The course continues to develop and there has been issues to deal with in the production and roll-out of the course. Key lessons learned so far centrally address the assumptions set out at the beginning of this paper and include:

-  The narrative and content of any learning process which encourages communities to engage in self-review has to be flexible enough to allow local 'flavours' to enrich the experience.
-  Diverse communities (e.g. Health, Social Care, Local Government and Pressure groups) as well as single 'communities of practice' can benefit from the CSC process.
-  But, 'community' has to 'want' to engage in the process of review if it is to take major benefit from the experience – there is an aspirational aspect to the process which really addresses the social mobility agenda.

² <http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/singleconversation>

- ✚ Sustainability may be the issue of our age, but this has to be an emergent property of the learning process and not a stick to drive social justice.
- ✚ The outcomes of the CSC process seem to be broadly positive across gender, ethnicity and professional groupings.
- ✚ All the communities engaged thus far in the CSC process have shown themselves to be intrinsically interested in their own sustainability however, they may not use this language to express it. Language can be a disincentive to engage in sustainability self-review if it is used as a coded or exclusive dialogue.

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